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# Was Percival Pott Really Entitled to the Honor of Having a Certain Spinal Disease Called by His Name?

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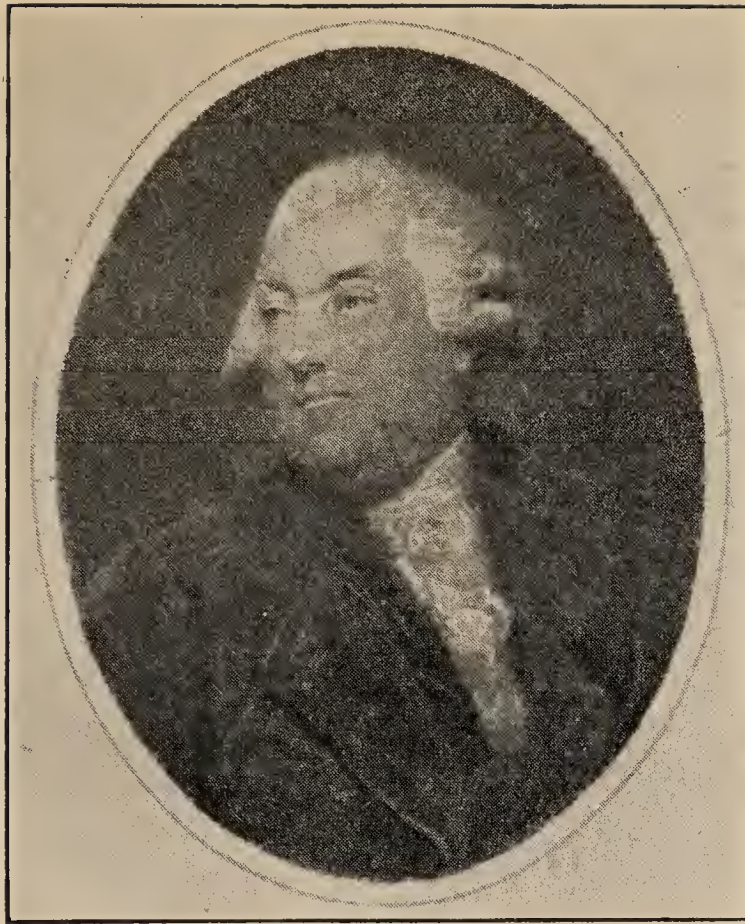
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PERCIVAL POTT, ESQ'R.

Engraved by Heath after Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1790.

WAS PERCIVAL POTT REALLY ENTITLED TO THE  
HONOR OF HAVING A CERTAIN SPINAL  
DISEASE CALLED BY HIS NAME?

A. J. STEELE, M. D.

I have never been partial to the application of proper names to the diseases of the human body, or to its anatomical peculiarities. We have not a few instances of the latter, as Achilles, Silviu, Rolando, Steno, etc., of the former as Bright, Renard, Addison, Strumpell, etc.; and even in our own department, Dupuytren, Charcot, Still, etc., but most of all Pott; a name doubtless on the lips of the profession more than any other.

These proper names carry with them an idea of honor to which the individual was entitled by virtue of discovery or first accurate description, and in that light seem reasonable. But a name should, so far as possible, carry with it a description of the thing itself, or some peculiarity, or indicate its office or its function or

its pathology. The profession are agreed to this, and are beginning to drop the proper names. Thus, we now rarely hear of "Bright's disease," and in lieu of "Pott's disease" we prefer to say tuberculous spondylitis, which interpreted means an inflammation of the spine, tuberculous in character. It carries with it the pathological condition of the affection; it has a definite significance; but the old name is too familiar, too brief, too terse to readily admit of change, so it will remain. But the query arises, did Percival Pott really deserve, for any work he had done, the world-wide honor that has already for one and one-quarter centuries been awarded him? This recognition of his worth and work turned upon the facts contained in an illustrated brochure he gave to the profession in 1782, describing a spinal trouble till then little understood. Judging from the title, it was written to clear up one sign, or, as we now term it, complication of the disease which has taken his name. The title of the work, which I have, is: "The Useless State of the Lower Limbs in Consequence of a Curvature of the Spine." Several charming illustrations elucidate the text.<sup>1</sup> The title is misleading, for later on he asserts that the cause of the useless limbs is a distemper which produces a destruction, or caries, of the vertebral bodies. Pott was the first one to assert that the curvature and the palsied limbs were due to one and the same cause.

Mr. Pott wrote two articles on this subject. In the first one he designated this condition of the lower limbs as a "palsy," but three years later he dropped it for the term "useless state," etc., preferring to limit the term palsy to what we designate flaccid paralysis. The element of spasticity staggered him.

In that day it was generally supposed that the deformity, or curvature, of the spine was due to a dislocation of the vertebræ, and the palsy to pressure on the cord by the displaced bone. All this Pott denied, making the following assertions: That the disease producing the spinal trouble was scrofula, now known to be tuberculosis; that the marks of ill-health supposed by every-

<sup>1</sup> We have borrowed a few of these illustrations because of their excellency, and to prove that our author well understood the macroscopic appearances and the changes that took place in the bones.





FIG. 1. Diseased Vertebrae. Pott, 1782.

body to be the result of the distortion were due to a systemic distemper, which also was the cause of the spinal breakdown; that erosion of the bodies of the vertebrae, and not enlargement, was



the result of this distemper; that the bodies of the vertebræ above and below the eroded ones were brought nearer each other, causing the posterior projection; that when located in the dorsal vertebræ, the sternum and ribs became deformed; that it was the vertebral bodies, never the articular processes, which were diseased; that without such erosion there could be no deformity; that disease of the upper spine was more apt to be followed by useless state of the lower limbs than of the lower spine; that "lumbal" and psoas abscesses were so called because of the place or region where they made their appearance externally; that caries of the spine was the cause of these abscesses; that the generally received opinion that all the attending symptoms were derived from the curvature, considered abstractly, was by no means founded on truth; that curvature with useless lower limbs was not due to a dislocation; that a distempered state of the parts preceded the erosion and was the original cause of the caries, the curvature and all the attendant mischiefs; that the attempts to reduce the supposed dislocation by means of swings, screws, etc., could possibly do no good, but on the contrary harm; that general complaints would be found to have preceded the curvature.

All these conclusions of Pott were at the time new and original, and all credit is due him. Thus the honor conferred by using his name in connection with this "distemper" is just. It was well earned. In the matter of his treatment of the "distemper" causing the palsy, we cannot be so commendatory. He advised issues which encouraged suppuration. Cures were reported, but not, I believe, as a result of the counter-irritation, but because of the perforced quiet and rest given the spine from the paralysis and from the soreness induced by issues. This idea of treatment by suppurative counter-irritation continued for many years thereafter, for at the time of my graduation I saw Gross and Pancoast use the actual cautery on children's backs suffering from tuberculous spondylitis. The odor and smoke of burning flesh were marked. Today, the pathology being better understood, the therapeutics are more rational.

Was Pott, as an educated man and as a well informed, efficient and progressive surgeon, entitled to the consideration and honor



of the profession? We believe so; and that he is to be admired, a few facts culled from his life will be convincing. Born in London in 1713, where now stands the Bank of England; his father died



FIG. 2. Diseased Vertebrae. Pott, 1782.

when he was four years old, leaving him a patrimony of five pounds sterling. This amount was found after Percival's death among his effects in a tin box, the son having religiously kept it all his



life—inviolate. When sixteen years old he was bound for seven years to Ed. Nourse, Surgeon to St. Bartholomew's Hospital, for which his mother paid two hundred pounds, as a premium. Young Pott was privileged to prepare the subjects for demonstration which his preceptor used in his anatomical lectures. At the age of 23 he was admitted to the freedom of the Barbers Co. Three years later he took the livery of the Barber-Surgeons Co., paying ten pounds for the same. When the Barber-Surgeons Co. was dissolved, Pott allied himself with the Surgeons. In 1753 Pott and John Hunter were elected the first lecturers on anatomy of the Surgeons Co. At the age of 48 he was elected examiner, and when 52 governor of the Corporation of Surgeons. He had been made Assistant Surgeon to St. Bartholomew's when he was 31 and full Surgeon five years later.

Pott introduced many improvements into the art of Surgery during his long term of office, rendering its practice more humane and less painful both to patient and surgeon. Escharotic dressings were constantly employed, and the actual cautery was in such frequent use that at the time of the surgeons' visits at the hospital it was regularly heated and prepared as a part of the necessary apparatus. It was only by Pott's constant endeavors that these abominable methods were discarded.

When he was 43 years old, he was accidentally thrown from his horse, producing a compound fracture of the leg, the bone being forced through the integument. He would not suffer himself to be moved until he had made the necessary dispositions. He sent to Westminster for two chairmen to bring their poles, and patiently lay on the cold pavement—middle of January—until they arrived. He purchased a door, to which he had them nail the poles. When all was ready, he caused himself to be laid on it and carried home. The consulting surgeons considered the case so desperate as to demand immediate amputation. Pott, convinced that no one could be a proper judge of his own case, submitted to their opinion, and the instruments were actually gotten ready, when Mr. Nourse, his former master, who had been prevented from coming sooner, entered the room. After examining the limb he conceived that there was a possibility of saving it. This opinion



was acquiesced in, the attempt was made and fortunately proved successful. The term Pott's Fracture is still commonly applied to that particular variety of broken ankle which he sustained on that occasion.



FIG. 3. Cured Vertebrae. Pott, 1782.

During the necessary leisure attending his confinement, Pott first turned to authorship, planning a treatise on ruptures. He thus began to write at the age of 43, exactly when his illustrious pupil, John Hunter, published his first book. From that time



on he published a long series of books, and his writings revolutionized the practice of surgery in England. His lectures at St. Bartholomew's became the most celebrated in London. At the age of 51 he was elected a member of the Royal Society. In 1783 he treated Dr. Johnson for sarcocele. In 1786 he was elected an honorary member of both the R. C. S., Edinboro, and the R. C. S., Ireland. At the age of 74 he resigned the surgery of St. Bartholomew's Hospital, having served it half a century, and was elected a governor, but lived to enjoy the honor only one year, dying of pneumonia in 1788. John Hunter was elected to fill his place in the Surgeons Co. in the following year.

While his mother lived, he was her comfort and stay, having remained single until after her death, then he married and nine children blessed the union. His kindness of heart was proverbial. At one time he had three needy surgeons living in his house until he could provide them with the means of earning an independent livelihood. His high character and blameless life helped to raise the social standing of the surgeons in England.

Early in life he predominated in a profession which has been said not to procure its members bread until they have no teeth to eat it. (Wadd.) He was the first surgeon of his day, and as a scientific writer, remarkable for the classic purity of his style, the scrupulous precision of his definitions and the unerring closeness of his argument. He introduced in surgery a wholesome skepticism. In practice he relied on his own observation, and was guided by common sense. He was a clinical rather than a scientific surgeon, for pathology as yet had no existence. In practical surgery, he takes rank before his pupil Hunter; but in scientific surgery the pupil was greater than his master. He has no work on General Surgery, but many tracts on special subjects, which have been edited and bound in three volumes, on every page of which I find interesting reading.

He surely was so good a man and so great a surgeon that no discredit will be done if we continue to apply his name to the tuberculous spine.

Note.—Many of the above facts were culled from Pott's own writings as well as from those of D'Arcy Power, F. R. C. S.







